

William E. Allen, Jr, MD, FACR: Pioneering Physician and Leader

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Editor's Note: This article is based on the Allen Lecture presented by Dr Oestreich, August 3, 1998, New Orleans, LA during the 103rd Annual Convention and Scientific Assembly of the National Medical Association.

For most of the 20th century, William E. Allen, Jr, MD was a preeminent physician, teacher, organizer, community leader, and historian, as well as contributor of service to the National Medical Association (NMA) (Figure 1). His path was not always easy, but he persevered, maintaining his good nature and hard work during his long, distinguished, and decorated career. Here I recall some of the highlights and the background of the "founding father" (W.E. Allen, Jr, MD, written communication, 1972) of the Section on Radiology of the NMA.

Dr Allen's widow, Para Lee Batts Allen, RN, of St Louis (originally from Waco, TX), is in frail health, but sends her best wishes to the attendees of this lecture. The Allens are childless; however, Dr Allen's namesake and nephew, William E. Allen, III, who assisted me in gathering material for this paper, is represented here by his son, Stephen, a graduate student in New Orleans.

Each of us who knew Dr Allen have fond memories. Invariably those with whom I have talked recalled words of encouragement and words of wel-

come. The twinkle in his eyes (when appropriate) was legendary.

Born August 14, 1903 to William E. Allen, Sr and Marion C. Wood Allen, William E. Allen, Jr, MD, grew up with a younger brother, Fred, and a sister, Irma. He attended P.S. 100 in Pensacola, FL, graduating from Booker T. Washington High School in 1923.

Dr Allen enrolled in Howard University, Washington DC, and received his ROTC commission in 1923 as second lieutenant. He soon joined the University Symphony Orchestra, eventually becoming concert master—first violin. In 1925, the Orchestra was invited to play on the East Steps of the Capitol for the inauguration celebration of President Calvin Coolidge on March 4. The next day, Dr Allen received a lyres-and-stars award at Howard noon-day chapel exercises.¹ (Many years later, Dr and Mrs Allen would be official invitees to the Inauguration of President Truman in 1949.)

In 1926, he joined the Chi Delta Mu medical, dental, and pharmacy fraternity; 20 years later he became an officer (secretary) of the St Louis chapter. In 1927, he received his BS in chemistry from Howard University. Howard's Phi Beta Kappa was not founded until 1958; Dr Allen received his key of membership 50 years after graduation in a 1977 ceremony.

Dr Allen also received his medical degree in 1930 from Howard University. Undergraduate roentgenology was taught by Professor Herbert C. Scurlock, MD, or by B. Price Hurst, MD, the chairman of radiology at Freedmen's Hospital. Howard inaugurated a new medical school building in 1928, and in 1929, tuition was raised from \$200 to \$250.

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Dr Allen's internship was spent at St Louis (Missouri) City Hospital #2, an institution whose patient population was African American. He received a commission as first lieutenant in the US Army Medical Reserve Corps in 1931. That same year, he began his four-year residency in radiology at City Hospital #2. His chief mentors were Leroy Sante, MD, and Edgar W. Spinzig, MD. In 1933, during the course of his residency, St Mary's Infirmary of St Louis began accepting African-American patients; Dr Allen was appointed radiologist-in-chief at that time. He almost immediately organized a school of x-ray technology at St Mary's. The first graduate of the program, Rose Marie Pegues, became the first African American to be registered by the national technologists' registry (after strong insistence by the Sisters of St Mary to overcome an exclusionary policy by the registry against African Americans).

In 1934, Dr Allen's application for membership into the Radiological Society of North America was rejected at its annual meeting in Memphis, TN. No known African-American radiologist was admitted for membership until 1939. His reapplication in 1947 was deferred until 1948.

In 1934, Dr Allen published scientific articles in both mainstream radiology journals, the *American Journal of Roentgenology*² and *Radiology*,³ as well as in the *Journal of the National Medical Association (JNMA)*.⁴ Many articles would follow through the years, especially in the *JNMA*. At the 1934 Annual Meeting of the NMA in Nashville, TN, Dr Allen lectured on sponsored research and thorium imaging of the liver and spleen. The research by Dr Allen and his colleague and coauthor, Vaughn C. Payne, Sr, MD, was sponsored by the Sisters of St Mary's Hospital. A classmate at medical school, Dr Payne was Dr Allen's career-long collaborator in St Louis in radiology practice, teaching, and publication. Also in 1934, Dr Allen began his tenure as chief of staff of St Louis' Peoples (formerly Provident) Hospital. In the same year, he lectured to the NMA component medical society in St Louis, the Mound City Medical Society, on carcinoma of the cervix.

Before the American Board of Radiology was established, specialty recognition was bestowed by the American Medical Association Council on Medical Education and Hospitals. Dr Allen was declared an approved specialist in Radiology in February 1935, becoming the fifth African American to be designated among more than 1250 approved

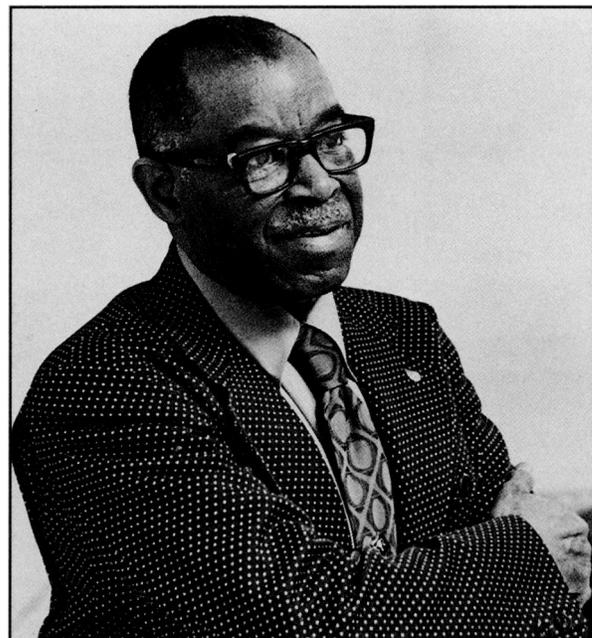


Figure 1. Informal photograph of Dr Allen as it appeared in the official program of this Allen Lecture. (Photograph courtesy of William H. McAlister, MD.)

radiologists. Later that year, the American Board of Radiology gave its first board examinations, and Dr Allen was certified in "roentgenology," the only African American certified that first year. In 1939, he was further certified by the board in "radiology." For that examination in Detroit, Dr Allen was required to take a hotel's freight elevator, an indignity he recalled vividly in a newspaper interview in 1976.⁵ Dr Allen was named First Assistant Radiologist at City Hospital #2 in 1935, having completed his residency.

In New Orleans, Dr Allen spoke at the 1936 Annual Meeting of the NMA on the fluoroscopic reduction of fractures. He lectured often at the Annual Meetings, and in mid-October 1981, a few months before his terminal illness became known, he submitted an abstract for a lecture to be given at the 1982 Annual Meeting.

In 1936, he also spoke at the John A. Andrew Clinical Society at Tuskegee, AL, giving a slide demonstration on "the gastrointestinal tract in Negroes." He became chairman of the new NMA Commission of Radium and X-rays in 1936.

The next year was the first of many that he was Director of Exhibits, including Scientific Exhibits, for the NMA Annual Meeting, a position he filled with his usual vigor and organizing ability (and for years

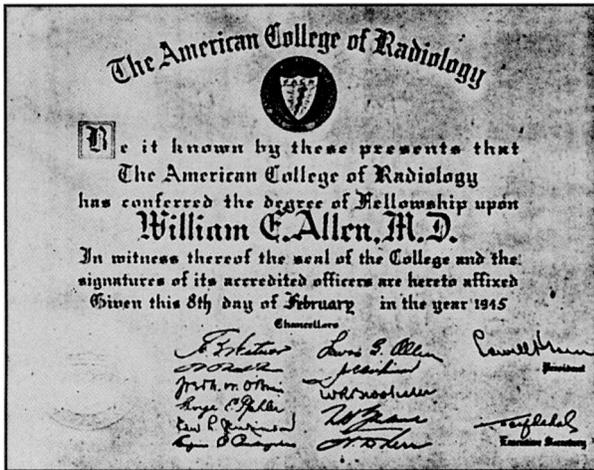


Figure 2. Dr Allen’s 1945 certificate of Fellowship in the American College of Radiology. (Photograph courtesy of the Allen family.)

without any budget allotted). Dr Allen often was one of the chief scientific exhibitors. After serving in World War II, he returned to being Chairman of National Scientific Exhibits. In 1937, he was chairman of the Radiological Advisory Committee for the convention of the American Society of Radiologic Technologists in St Louis, MO.

Dr Allen became the first African-American member of the American College of Radiology in 1939, an organization that represents the interests of all radiologists in the United States. In 1945, he became the first African American to be elected to fellowship in that organization (Figure 2). A proud moment came in 1974 when Dr Allen received the Gold Medal of the College, the premier recognition for a radiologist in the United States (Figure 3). No other African American has been so honored.

Dr Allen served on the editorial board of the *JNMA* in 1939; he served for more than two decades on the board or the advisory board. At the 1939 NMA annual meeting in New York City (at the World’s Fair), he organized the first annual refresher course on x-rays, an annual event that preceded the establishment of the Section on Radiology.

In 1939, Dr Allen was promoted to captain in the Army reserve. He volunteered for active duty and was told that there was no place in the military service for a black radiologist. Therefore, the next year, he became battalion surgeon for the 366th infantry in Fort Devens, MA, becoming plans and training officer for the medical detachment. In 1942, when

Fort Huachuca (Arizona) Station Hospital #1 (with 946 beds) was established for African Americans in the military, Dr Allen was invited to be its radiologist-in-chief. Initially, the position was denied on the grounds that the 366th regiment needed him more, but Dr Allen wrote to Dr Byrl Kirklin, the Secretary of the American Board of Radiology, who convinced the Surgeon General to allow the transfer to Fort Huachuca.⁶ I speculate that Dr Allen had Dr Kirklin mention the Army’s earlier statement about a place for a black radiologist in the military. At Huachuca’s Station Hospital, Dr Allen trained medical officers in elementary roentgenology for service in the war zones. In addition, he started and directed an AFS-WAC School for X-ray Technologists (the only one in the Women’s Army Corps for African Americans). He was promoted to major in 1943.

Quotes from two published letters by Dr Allen during his Huachuca days provide insight to his feelings, activities, and sense of humor. From a 1942 letter to Charles C. Morchand, publisher of *JNMA*:

[Fort Huachuca, Arizona station hospital] is a huge place...new and splendidly equipped. You will pardon my pride in having been selected by the Government to head one of the professional divisions. We go over frequently [to Mexico, 40 miles away], particularly to the bull fights.⁶

From a 1945 letter to Morchand:

I am developing into quite a pistol shot, but my attempts so far to ride these cavalry horses have so far resulted in the horses being far ahead of the game.⁷

Up until Dr Allen’s active duty in World War II, he had been first violin and clarinet in the St Louis Little Symphony Orchestra and technical advisor to the Progressive Movie Club.

At cessation of hostilities in 1945, Dr Allen returned to inactive duty, and he was named as Radiologist Consultant to the War Department (only one other African American was named a consultant, surgeon Roscoe C. Giles).⁸ Dr Allen was promoted to lieutenant in 1946, and in 1952, he was transferred to the US Army Medical Corps Honorary Reserve.

Back in St Louis, Dr Allen founded the School of Technology at Homer G. Phillips Hospital in 1946. In 1948, his article on medical writing in the *JNMA* was published.⁹ Perhaps as a result, he was elected to membership in the American Medical Writers Association the following year. He attended the 25th

anniversary banquet of the American College of Radiology in Chicago in 1948.

A landmark of the Radiology Section and for the NMA, Dr Allen founded and was elected the first chairman of the Section on Radiology of the National Medical Association in 1949.

In 1955, he became a fellow of the Inter-American College of Radiology and was licensed by the US Atomic Energy Commission for the therapeutic use of radioisotopes. The date of his membership in the American Medical Association is not specifically known; he was listed as a member and fellow in 1956, but had not been listed as a member in 1950.

By the mid-1950s, Dr Allen began receiving numerous honors including: Homer G. Phillips Award in 1956; 1962 Special Citation from the St Louis Branch, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and their Special Silver Plaque; Distinguished Public Service Award of the *St Louis Argus* in 1963; and the 1964 Outstanding Service Award of the Homer G. Phillips Hospital Interns Alumni Association and an American Cancer Society Award. The NMA presented Dr Allen with the Distinguished Service Award in 1967. He had previously served as vice president of the NMA in 1963.

The first time that African-American radiologists were included in the general history of radiology was in *The Trail of the Invisible Light* by E.R.N. Grigg.¹⁰ Dr Allen and Dr Jack Tarleton of Meharry were the principal sources of this material for Dr Grigg, who concluded that Dr Allen was a "leading organizer."

In the late 1960s, Dr Allen served on the American College of Radiology's Commission on Public Relations, becoming chairman in 1970. He was on the Board of Directors of the Missouri chapter of the College when he received the American College of Radiology gold medal in 1974.

Insight into Dr Allen's career and the emotions involved are contained in an interview with Dr Allen that appeared in the *St Louis Argus* in 1976.⁵ Although he stated, "I'm allergic to publicity,"⁵ it is clear that Dr Allen allowed his accomplishments to be made public through the years, if only as a beacon to point the way to young colleagues in those difficult times.

The William E. Allen, Jr, MD Annual Lecture of the Section on Radiology, held on an evening during the annual convention of the NMA, was established by his friends and admirers in the Section to honor him while he was still active and appreciated. Dr Leslie Alexander, of Brooklyn, delivered the first

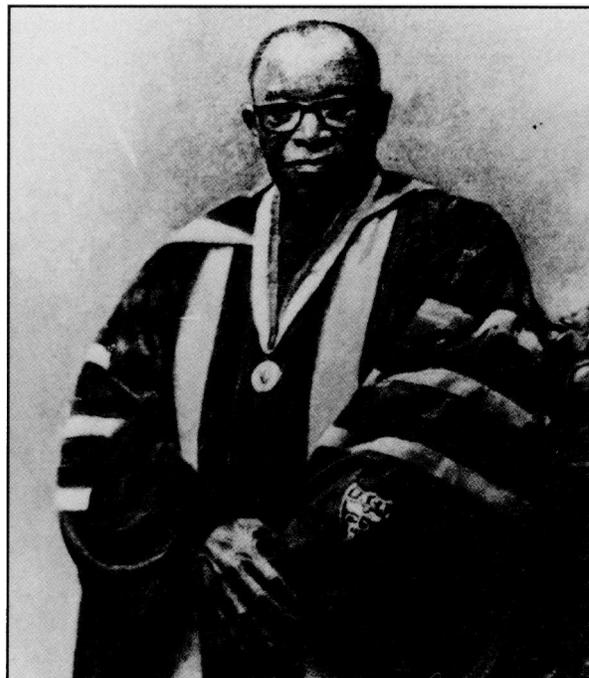


Figure 3. Formal portrait of Dr Allen as Gold Medalist of the American College of Radiology, 1974. (Photograph courtesy of the Allen family.)

lecture in 1978, with the Allens in attendance. An Allen Lecture has occurred annually since then.

More honors continued in these years, including: the library of the Howard University Radiology Department and the Radiotherapy Suite of Homer G. Phillips Hospital were named after Dr Allen in 1977, and the Outstanding Service Award of the Howard University College of Medicine was awarded in 1980.

In the last months of 1981, Dr Allen suddenly became ill, suffering just weeks from stomach cancer (one of the diseases he often treated during his career). Three weeks before his death on December 31, 1981, he lectured to medical students at Washington University in St Louis, MO. At his last NMA function, the midyear meeting of the Radiology Section at the RSNA in Chicago, November 17, he appeared in good spirits and health, giving the usual good advice to "his" organization. Dr Allen's funeral on January 6, 1982, was filled with emotion, memory, and praise. He was buried in St Peter's Cemetery.

The spirit of William E. Allen, Jr, MD lives on. The chapter on the history of African Americans in radiology was prepared by Dr Allen in 1970 for a

proposed book by Dr Grigg. Dr Grigg died before the book was completed. However, through the special efforts of Dr Nancy Knight, then historian of the American College of Radiology, and in large measure due to the support of dozens of members of the NMA Section on Radiology, Dr Allen's classic opus appeared in 1996 as the first chapter of *A Centennial History of African Americans in Radiology*.⁸

To close, I quote on my behalf from words of our late, dear friend, Dr John B. Holton, at the close of his, the fifth Allen Lecture in 1982¹¹:

To be permitted to give the Annual William E. Allen, Jr, Lecture is to achieve the highest honor possible in Black radiology. Therefore, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Section for permitting me this honor, and to you friends of the Section for your time and attention.

Literature Cited

Note: A word on sources—material in this article not specifically referenced here has come from various issues of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*; the *Argus* interview⁵; Dr Allen's⁸ and Dr Holton's¹¹ chapters; documents from Dr and Mrs Allen lent by William E. Allen, III; vital records from Pensacola, FL;

histories of Howard University; membership directories of the AMA; the February 1974 Bulletin of the American College of Radiology; and reminisces of Dr Allen's colleagues, as well as the wonderful interaction with Dr and Mrs Allen through the years.

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